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Confucian Democracy and a Pluralistic *Li-Ki* Metaphysics

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Abstract: This essay explores the possible constructive role of a Confucian metaphysics in the pluralistic Confucian-democratic context of South Korea. In his recent landmark study, Sungmoon Kim has argued that South Korean democracy is sustained by a public culture of civility that is grounded in Confucian habits and mores and yet is pluralistic in ethos. I appreciatively interrogate Kim's thesis in order to advance a claim that a comprehensive Confucian doctrine such as Confucian metaphysics can contribute significantly to the flourishing of Confucian democratic public culture, provided that it affirm a pluralistic ontology. I contend that the tradition of Korean Neo-Confucian *li-ki* metaphysics, particularly one found in the works of Nongmun Im Seong-ju, offers rich resources for a pluralistic ontology despite its history of ethical monism. By putting Nongmun's thought in conversation with some of the contemporary critiques of the Schmittian (mis-)appropriation of the notion of popular sovereignty, I outline a pluralized version of the Rousseauian general will—a kind of critically affectionate solidarity of diverse groups of people—that is Confucian in character. My claim is that such a critically affectionate solidarity finds its grounds in and draws its nourishment from a pluralistic Confucian ontology.

Keywords: Korean Neo-Confucianism; *li-ki* metaphysics; Confucian democracy; popular sovereignty; pluralism; public culture

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1. Introduction

Given the spate of political drama that has unfolded in South Korea in the last few years, it is probably safe to assume that the nation has become a flourishing democracy, not only in a formal, procedural sense of the term but also in a substantive manner, encompassing the political, economic, and cultural dimensions of South Korean society. The Candlelight Revolution—the months-long nonviolent street protests of millions of citizens against then-President Park Geun-hye's corruption and abuse of power—led to the first impeachment and removal from office of a sitting president in the spring of 2017. The new election that immediately followed ushered in a more progressive government that has implemented various liberalizing policies aimed at strengthening civil rights protections, freedom of the press, and labor rights, among others. At the same time, it has waged a campaign to root out the corrupt and authoritarian elements in the government that had undermined and subverted the rule of law. The Candlelight Revolution has also revitalized the civic sphere, with civic organizations and trade unions freshly empowered to counter the entrenched alliance among politicians, high-ranking government officials, and the giant family-controlled business conglomerates (*chaebeols*). The voices representing the human rights of oppressed and marginalized people—foremost among them feminist and LGBTQI—are increasingly asserting themselves in the public square and the media landscape, most prominently igniting a #MeToo movement directed against prominent politicians, business leaders, intellectuals and more.

This kind of momentous historical development, of course, does not spring out of nowhere. A prominent feature of South Korean society is that it is, to this day, deeply Confucian. Up until 1910,

Korea was ruled for five centuries by one of the most Confucian dynasties of all times. Long before the end of Joseon dynasty in the early twentieth century, Confucian habits and mores, centered around the ritual of ancestor veneration and the familial ethical code of filiality, had filtered down from top to bottom, infiltrating all levels of society and all aspects of daily life (Deuchler 1992). It is true that the great social upheavals of the twentieth century—the experience of the nearly half-century-long Japanese colonial rule, the division of Korean peninsula into two Koreas and the devastating Korean War, the rapid process of modernization that has profoundly transformed post-war South Korea into an industrial, urban society—have interrupted and destroyed so much that was tradition. Nonetheless, the Confucian habits and mores have persisted, having been profoundly entrenched in the psyche of the people and in the ways they relate to one another on a daily basis.

Many studies have been conducted in the last decade or so on what role, if any, Confucianism has played in the successful democratization of South Korea and the establishment of constitutionalism in the nation.[1] It is however beyond the scope of this essay to investigate the possible historical causal relations between the Korean Confucian tradition and the democratic transformation of South Korea. In this essay I will take the reality of vibrant pluralistic democracy in South Korea as a context within which I examine a much-debated political-philosophical problem concerning the relationship between Confucianism and democracy, namely the question of the possibility of a *Confucian* democracy.[2] More specifically, I will explore possible contributions that Confucianism as a *comprehensive doctrine* could make for the flourishing of a pluralistic democracy.[3] For that purpose, I will center my discussion on the tradition of so-called Neo-Confucian "moral metaphysics" (Tu 1982, p. 10)[4] and ask what role it may play in developing a robust theory of Confucian democracy.

2. Confucian Democracy and "Religious" Confucianism

In his recent landmark study, *Confucian Democracy in East Asia*, Sungmoon Kim envisions a democracy with characteristics indigenous to East Asia. The kind of democracy he envisions is one sustained and animated by a public culture grounded in Confucian habits and mores, befitting the social context of South Korea where Confucianism governed almost every aspect of life just a century ago and still does in a much more attenuated, yet deeply lingering sense. The Confucian habits and mores that Kim proposes are qualitatively different from those of a traditional Confucian society, which was a "ritual-constituted gemeinschaft that aims at an organic whole" (Kim 2014, p. 14). Rather, they are core components of a more loosely circumscribed Confucian public culture shared by the citizens of a democratic civil society who subscribe to different comprehensive moral doctrines (p. 10).

In articulating those habits and mores, Kim highlights the familial moral sentiments traditionally at the heart of the Confucian ethical and ritualistic tradition, namely filial affection (親 *qīn*) in the parent–child relation, the most primordial of all relations in Confucian thought (p. 145). In the dominant, Mencian strain of Confucian tradition, filial affection is thought to reflect in the most primordial sense the heart of empathy (惻隱之心 *cèyǐnzhīxīn*), which is endowed by Heaven in all of us and which grows into the virtue of humanity or benevolence (仁 *ren*) in and through ethical and ritual practices within the context of the so-called Five Relations (五倫 *wulun*). Hence, the parent–child relation serves as the model for the rest of the Five Relations, and in so doing makes the familial the paradigm for the public and the political (145–47).

According to Kim, in the Mencian perspective people's moral-political self-cultivation starts out from their practice of filial affection in the familial context, whose characteristic ethico-ritual form is filiality (孝悌 *xiaoti*), and their extension (推 *tui*) of it beyond the familial context (p. 141). This is how

1 See, among others, (Shin 2012; Kim 2015).
2 For an excellent survey of the debate, see (Angle 2012).
3 I borrow the phrase "comprehensive doctrine" from (Kim 2014, p. 144).
4 The phrase "moral metaphysics" was coined by Mou Zhongsan to highlight the Neo-Confucian attempts to provide a metaphysical basis of human existence as moral agents.

people come to cultivate various manifestations of the virtue of humanity, such as trustworthiness (信 *xin*), social harmony (和 *he*), respect of the elderly (敬老 *jinglao*), and respectful deference (辭讓 *cirang*), among others (p. 90). The Mencian political tradition confers the Mandate of Heaven to rule upon the virtuous and sage ruler because the sage ruler is the one who has acquired these virtues of humanity in a consummate fashion. He has nurtured the Heaven-endowed humanity (*ren*) in him to perfection and has thereby become the genuine human being who is able to extend the familial moral-sentiment in him analogically to encompass even strangers as if they were quasi-family members. As the supreme embodiment of the filial affection, the king, as the Son of Heaven and the Father to all his subjects, rules by extending that affection in the form of benevolence (*ren*) toward people and love (愛 *ai*) toward all living things (146–47).[5] In so doing, the monarch, as consummate exemplar-teacher, is able to nurture the moral cultivation of his subjects, not least by implementing public policies designed to provide favorable material conditions for their moral development. Here lies the essence of Confucian virtue politics (德治 *dezhi*) realized through a benevolent government (仁政 *renzheng*) (75–76).

In the contemporary East Asian context, Kim argues, it is however important to realize that "the capacity to envisage strangers as if they were (quasi-)family members does not necessarily have to rely on the foundational metaphysical account of human nature and particular moral virtues affiliated with it" (p. 147). In other words, the familial moral sentiments can be decoupled from the Mencian metaphysical account of filial affection as rooted in the Heaven-endowed virtue of humanity. The public virtues, mores, and habits which the familial moral sentiments nurture can be unmoored from the cosmological-metaphysical understanding of the familial as the political best exemplified in the idea of the Mandate of Heaven to rule given to the virtuous ruler.

Kim's reasons for this move lie in the fact such cosmological-metaphysical accounts are comprehensive moral doctrines. Central to a pluralist democracy today is the sound moral-political judgments of its citizens, not the kind of full-blown moral ideal of sagehood and the concomitant programs of moral cultivation found in the classical Confucian cosmological-metaphysical accounts of the familial as political, especially when the latter's exaltation of moral equality—that anyone can become a sage—is intertwined with an unquestioning acceptance of political inequality (p. 144). Going further, Kim distinguishes Confucian *public* culture, which he advocates, from Confucian culture in an ethically monistic sense, a case of which is Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism that had exercised a socio-political and cultural monopoly in Korea for centuries. Korean Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism allowed no room for ethical pluralism by instituting a patriarchal social hierarchy undergirded by clan law (宗法 *zongbeop zongfa*) and family rituals (家禮 *garye jiali*) (p. 283). As "religious Confucianism"—and a monistic/patriarchal one to boot—such a Confucian culture should not constitute the core of Confucian *public* culture, although citizens may hold it as their private value system (that is, as "private Confucianism") (p. 284). In summary, comprehensive moral doctrines are something of an overkill when it comes to the task of constituting a democratic public culture, and are to be sidelined when their ethical monism collides with the value pluralism at the heart of a pluralistic democracy.

Today, Kim observes, the Confucian virtues, both familial and political because they are based on the capacity to regard strangers as if they were quasi-family members, are "widely cherished as public virtues and socially available through the continued ritual practices" in traditionally Confucian societies in East Asia (p. 90). What renders East Asian societies Confucian today is not their citizens' adherence to comprehensive Confucian moral doctrines but the distinctively Confucian character of their public mores and habits in the sense mentioned above, which is predicated on "the social

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5 Kim notes that the will of the people—their contentment or discontent—was always understood to express vicariously the Mandate of Heaven, leading to the demand that the ruler translate his moral accountability to Heaven into his political responsibility for the well-being of the people (p. 193). This is the meaning of the time-honored Confucian political thesis of "people-centrism" (民本 *minběn*) (p. 158). The Confucian literati, the ruling class, "saw themselves not merely as king's servants but Heaven servants, *public servants* (公僕 *gongpu*)", sharing with the ruler moral accountability to Heaven (p. 194).

semiotics of Confucian rituals" still widely practiced (p. 90). How, then, do these public mores and habits give rise to the public culture of a thriving pluralistic democracy?

Because it is rooted in, and nurtured and sustained by various ethical and ritual expressions of filial affection, Kim claims that such a Confucian public culture is characterized by civility. At the same time, this public culture consists in a kind of public reason animated by "critical affection" (p. 132) or "critical familial affection" (p. 137), which prevents civility from degenerating into docility. A family is often filled with psychological tension and moral disagreements because of the "affective resentment" present in one's love of one's family members, enabling the family members to love the virtues of one another while hating the injustices (p. 149). This is why familial moral sentiments consist in *critical* affection, which, when extended to the public, forms the core of Confucian public reason, empowering the citizens of a pluralistic democratic society to regard one another as members of a quasi-family even when vehemently and passionately disagreeing with one another (p. 150).[6] Critical affection forms the heart of the ethos indispensable to a well-functioning Confucian pluralistic democracy.

Relating this notion of Confucian public culture of civility to the specific context of South Korea, Kim suggests that a concrete example of the familial moral sentiments in the South Korean context is found in *jeong*, the sense of closeness and mutual affection which Koreans feel as they reason with one another, as if they were all members of one big family. Since *jeong* enables Koreans to regard the Korean nation as one extended family, it nurtures in them a sense of ethical responsibility toward one another, which Kim calls "*uri* (we)-responsibility", which allows them to maintain a bond of "critical affection" even when disagreeing with one another across deep differences as strangers to one another. This, as "a uniquely Korean-Confucian mode of general will" (p. 222), is the key to a public culture of civility in the South Korean context—the kind of public reason and culture that has sustained and continues to sustain the drive toward a pluralist democracy in South Korea.

Kim's thesis is a provocative one with profound implications for assessing the role that the deeply embedded Confucian heritage in East Asia has to play in the growth and maturing of democratic institutions and cultures across the East Asian nations. His key argument—that in order to accommodate the value pluralism of a democratic public culture, the Confucian public virtues nurtured by the familial moral sentiments must be decoupled from the Confucian moral cosmology and metaphysics in which those virtues have traditionally been embedded—represents a significant breakthrough in so assessing the role of Confucian heritage in today's East Asia. This is especially the case in the context of the current debates around the notion of Confucian democracy, since Kim's thesis is an important corrective, in my view, to the similar attempts made by the contemporary advocates of Confucian meritocracy and "perfectionism", such as Daniel Bell, Tongdong Bai, Jiang Qing, and Joseph Chan, to divorce the ideal of moral-political meritocracy from the cosmology and metaphysics underlying traditional Confucian virtue politics (Bell 2006; Bai 2012; Qing 2013; Chan 2014). The principal difference between Kim and the Confucian meritocrats/perfectionists lies in the fact that, due to their retention of Confucian conceptions of (objectively) good life, the latter end up providing inadequate explanations of how they can avoid ethical monism when their non-comprehensive doctrines of political meritocracy/perfectionism are all about publicly promoting moral-political cultivation of citizens guided precisely by those substantive conceptions of good life.[7] Given the limited scope of this essay, however, I will not discuss further the disagreements between the said advocates of Confucian meritocracy and the Confucian democrats like Kim.[8]

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[6] This is precisely why Kim calls Confucian public reason a *bridging capital* that "bonds citizens horizontally across their deep differences" rather than a *bonding capital* that "cements the existing social fabric of moral community" (p. 148).

[7] Of the Confucian meritocrats/perfectionists, Joseph Chan comes closest to addressing seriously the issue of value pluralism in modern constitutional democracy, while Jiang Qing explicitly foregrounds his desire to rehabilitate the traditional Confucian ideal of virtue politics to the extent of appealing to the transcendent, sacred legitimacy of "heaven".

[8] Among the ranks of Confucian democrats are Deweyan communitarians like Roger Ames, David Hall, and Sor-hoon Tan. See (Ames and Hall 1999; Tan 2004).

I would like, rather, to raise a question that Kim does not explicitly pursue in his work: what would then be the role of Confucianism as a comprehensive moral doctrine or ethical system in a Confucian public culture? Kim names such a Confucianism "religious Confucianism" or "private Confucianism" and relegates it to the status of a private value system held by individual citizens or associations, with little if any role to play in constituting the core of Confucian public culture. However, if, as Kim argues, Confucian public values and practices such as "filial and fraternal love and responsibility, respect of elders, moral criticism and rectification of government, and social harmony" (p. 284) have made a critical contribution to the democratization of South Korea and still underpin its Confucian public culture, then one is driven to ask: what gave birth to those values and practices, and nurtured them through the centuries? The answer is pretty straightforward: it is Confucianism as a comprehensive moral doctrine, and, more specifically, in the case of Korea, ethically monistic and socially patriarchal Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism. It is therefore apropos to ask if Confucian public culture could sustain itself as Confucian without the gestating womb and the nourishing breastmilk of Confucianism as a comprehensive ethical system. While it may be necessary to distinguish clearly Confucian public culture from "religious" or "private" Confucianism" and not to allow the latter to be legally established at the core of the former, it does seem beneficial for the health of a pluralistic Confucian democracy to consider the public—that is, political—role of Confucianism as a comprehensive doctrine or worldview.

In the context of the United States, we find analogues of "religious" Confucianism having a public, political role to play. Given its history, one could persuasively argue that the public mores and habits of the citizens of the United States are still Christian in an attenuated sense of the term, despite the "wall of separation" between church and state erected by the First Amendment to the Constitution. Precisely due to the loosely Christian character of the public culture of the United States, Christianity as a comprehensive doctrine and ethical system wields in this land a considerable influence on public discourse. Its influence, however, is a double-edged sword. The enduring political power of right-wing, fundamentalist—and even theocratic—Christian evangelicalism, as prominently displayed in the election of President Donald Trump, is an exemplary case unveiling the danger posed by a comprehensive doctrine when a significant part of the public culture traces its roots to and is still very much nurtured and animated by that doctrine.[9] At the same time, Martin Luther King Jr. and progressive black churches are a shining testament to the salutary effects that a form of Christianity as a comprehensive doctrine can have on the maturing of a pluralistic democratic civil society.

In assessing the public role of Confucianism as a comprehensive doctrine, then, the key point at issue is what kind. A comprehensive doctrine seems by definition to boast a totalizing horizon that engulfs all differences. Nevertheless, encompassing does not necessarily or always mean nullifying. There may be a comprehensive doctrine or ethical system that offers a space for myriad differences to blossom within its horizon without subsuming them all under a single authoritative orthodoxy. Such a doctrine or system would nurture the kind of public culture that "relaxes what counts as an assault upon the sacred", as William Connolly has suggested (Connolly 2005, p. 147). Within the context of South Korea, a good candidate for such a "pluralistically" comprehensive moral doctrine would have to be found within the orbits of Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism, given the dominant—almost exclusive—role it has played in shaping the Confucian character of the nation's public culture.

3. Neo-Confucian Moral Metaphysics: Monism or Pluralism?

It is beyond doubt that Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism tended to be ethically monistic, historically speaking, as Sungmoon Kim has argued. There may be various reasons for its being so, but my suspicion is that its ethically monistic tendency may have something to do at least partly with its intellectual heritage, namely, Neo-Confucian moral metaphysics, especially its focus on the ordering,

9 For a trenchant analysis of the political power and influence of the right-wing conservative evangelical Christianity in the United States, see (Connolly 2008).

unifying, and harmonizing power of pattern (理*li*). According to Neo-Confucian metaphysics, everything consists in a union of pattern (理 *li*) and psychophysical energy (氣 *qi*). Psychophysical energy is the vital energy of the universe that constitutes everything—visible and invisible, with form and without form, living and non-living, material and ideal, and body and mind.[10] Pattern, on the other hand, refers to the metaphysical structure of reality that is logically, ontologically, and normatively prior to psychophysical energy, yet is always found "embodied" in the latter and dependent on it for creative dynamism.[11] Pattern and psychophysical energy are intertwined in the following manner. Pattern in its state of sheer—structuring—potentiality is one, simple, indeterminate, and abstract. When "activated" by psychophysical energy, however, this one Heavenly Pattern (天理 *tianli*) issues forth into myriad concrete patterns that structure the "ten thousand things" (萬物 *wanwu*) of the world. This is the crucial point made by Zhu Xi, the "systematizer" of Cheng-Zhu Neo Confucianism, when he says, famously, "Pattern unites, [whereas] psychophysical energy differentiates (理同氣異 *litong qiyi*)" (Zhu 2000b, vol. 5, p. 2075)[12] in relation to another well-known statement by one of his predecessors, Cheng Yi, "Pattern is one, but its manifestations are many (理一而分殊 *liyi er fenshu*)" (Cheng 1981a, vol. 2, p. 609).

This ontological account of one and many raises a critical question: if difference and multiplicity are introduced into pattern only insofar as pattern is activated by psychophysical energy, then does that not signal an unarticulated premise that pattern is originarily and ultimately one, and only derivatively and penultimately many? Insofar as pattern is the metaphysical ultimate with logical, ontological, and normative priority over psychophysical energy, an undercurrent of ontological asymmetry between one and many is unmistakable. One can detect this undercurrent in the celebrated and much-discussed saying of Cheng Yi on pattern: "Empty and tranquil, and without any sign, and yet all figures are luxuriantly present [沖漠無朕, 萬象森然已具 *chongmo wuzhen*, *wanxiang senran yiju*] . . . It is like a tree one hundred feet high. From the root to the branches and leaves, there is one thread running through all . . . Actually there is only one track." (Cheng 1981b, vol. 1, p. 153).[13] In illustrating the relationship between pattern as the simple, indeterminate and quiescent One ("empty and tranquil, and without any sign") and the myriad configurations of individual patterns found in it ("all figures are luxuriantly present"), Cheng Yi employs a historically influential arboretic metaphor in which the branches and leaves all derive from and depend on the single root system and trunk.[14]

This ontologically asymmetrical rendition of the relationship between one and many is accompanied in Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucian metaphysics by a propensity to devalue psychophysical energy not merely as the source of difference but also of evil. The unavoidable excesses and deficiencies in psychophysical energy's differentiating movements, it claims, inevitably give rise to individual configurations of psychophysical energy that are opaque, impure, turbid, indolent, and therefore less open and communicative. Zhu Xi locates the source of evil, which is understood as selfishness, in these non-resonating and uncommunicative configurations of psychophysical energy. When human beings are born with these kinds of psychophysical configuration, they more often than not obstruct the full realization of the virtue of humanity as empathy in them, namely, the essence of

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10 "Psychophysical energy" is a slight modification of Daniel K. Gardner's translation of *qi* into "psychophysical stuff" (Gardner 1990, p. 49 n. 52). A more precise translation would be "psycho-bio-physical energy".

11 I follow A. C. Graham's translation of *li* as "pattern" (Graham 1986, p. 421). In its interpretation by Zhu Xi, the duality of pattern and psychophysical energy comes to resemble the Western distinction between the metaphysical and the physical, as can be seen from the following well-known remark: "Pattern is the Way above physical form (形而上之道) and the root from which all things are born. Psychophysical energy, by contrast, is the vessel with physical form (形而下之器) and the instrument by which all things are produced" (Zhu 2000c, vol. 6, p. 2798).

12 The sentence also appears quoted in *Zhuzi yulei*: "If we discuss it from the perspective of the single origin of the myriad thing-events, pattern unites, while psychophysical energy differentiates" (Zhu 1986, vol. 1, p. 57). See also "What makes them similar is their pattern; what makes them different is their psychophysical energy" (Zhu 1986, vol. 1, p. 59).

13 I am using Wing-tsit Chan's translation of this saying with one modification, substituting "all figures" for "all things" (Chan 1963, p. 555).

14 This is in contrast to the famed "rhizomatic" metaphor employed by Deleuze and Guattari to underscore the ontological ultimacy of multiplicity (Deleuze and Guattari 1987).

the Heaven-endowed human nature that is their individual pattern (*li*) (Ching 2000, pp. 98–101).[15] It is a common Neo-Confucian observation that the vast majority of people are born with such non-resonating, uncommunicative and therefore involuted configurations of psychophysical energy (98–101). When this observation is coupled with the assignment of ontological penultimacy to the multiplicity of individual patterns, all derived from concrete determinations of the one indeterminate and abstract Heavenly Pattern by the morally ambiguous differentiating dynamic of psychophysical energy, the offspring is the Neo-Confucian *de facto*—if not *de jure*—devaluation of the moral agency of the vast majority of people.

This anti-egalitarian tendency shows itself in the Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucian opposition of "Heavenly Pattern" (天理 *tianli*), which is "public" (公 *gong*), to "human desire" (人欲 *renyu*), which is "private" (私 *si*), and its social patriarchalism in which the ruling class of cultured male gentry, who are versed in the classics and thus trained in the way of the sages to exercise public leadership, stand as "superior persons" (君子 *junzi*) over women, the working mass of commoners, and foreign "barbarians" as "inferior persons" (小人 *xiaoren*) (Zhu 2000a, vol. 4, p. 1746). The ruling elites impose their own parochial patterns—their ritual ways (*dao*)—upon the ruled subjects with the claim of representing Heavenly Pattern allegedly discovered by the ancient sages and preserved in the classics.[16] The way of the ruling elites enjoys unrivaled hegemony over any other ways of the oppressed multitude and does not suffer a competitor, since it stands for the "objectively settled" and "unchanging" universal pattern of the revered founding figures of human culture in whose name the elites rule and from whose legacy they derive the legitimacy of their rule as the guardians of the sagely learning (Angle 2009, pp. 35–36).[17] In this sense, the ethical monism and social patriarchalism of Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism prove to be the two sides of the same coin.

Hence, Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucian metaphysics in its traditional form is a poor candidate to serve as an inspiration for a pluralistically comprehensive moral doctrine that could sustain and nurture the Confucian public culture of a pluralistic democracy. Nevertheless, there are strains of Neo-Confucian thought, both in and outside the hegemonic Cheng-Zhu school, that reject the ontologically asymmetrical rendition of the one-many relation, i.e., ones that do not devalue the spontaneous movements of psychophysical energy in order unduly to valorize the unifying and harmonizing power of pattern. Let me hint at two possible sources, both from Korean Neo-Confucianism, for envisioning a pluralistically comprehensive moral doctrine. Hwadam Seo Gyeong-deok (花潭 徐敬德 1489–1546), for one, famously argued that at the ultimate ground of the world lies the One Psychophysical Energy (一氣 *ilgi*), also called "the Great Void" (太虛 *taeheo*), not pattern. The Great Void is in a state of utter clarity, stillness, oneness, purity, and emptiness (湛一虛 *damil cheongheo*) (Seo 2004, pp. 190, 202)[18] yet its spontaneously differentiating and structuring movements give rise to the myriad things of the world (p. 192).

A similar yet more sophisticated understanding of psychophysical energy as the creative ground of the cosmos is put forward by Nongmun Im Seong-ju (鹿門 任聖周 1711–1788). The core thesis of Nongmun's Neo-Confucian metaphysics, that "pattern and psychophysical energy are equally actual

15 Zhu Xi states, "Human nature is always good, yet there are some who are good from the time of their births, and there are those who are evil from the time of their births. This is due to the differences in their physical endowment . . . The goal of learning is to transform the physical endowment, although such transformation is very difficult" (Zhu 1986, vol. 1, p. 69).

16 Dai Zhen, a Qing Dynasty Neo-Confucian, criticized the Song and Ming Neo-Confucians for claiming the authority of the Heavenly Pattern to justify their own parochial interests and desires: "Of those who regard pattern as something obtained from Heaven and endowed in the heart-mind, there is none who does not replace it with their personal opinions" (Dai 1995, vol. 6, p. 155).

17 For the Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucians, Heavenly Pattern—which Angle translates as "universal coherence" (Angle 2009, p. 36)—is objectively settled (定 *ding*) and unchanging (常 *chang*), having been discovered by the early sages who had deep insights into the human nature.

18 Following Zhang Zai, Hwadam calls the One Psychophysical Energy also "the Great Void" (太虛 *taeheo*/*taixu*). (Seo 2004, p. 200). Hwadam understands 一氣 (*ilgi*) as the ultimate creative ground of the cosmos, in contrast to the dominant usage of the term within the Confucian and Daoist traditions.

[理氣同實 *ligi dongsil*],” claims that principle and psychophysical energy completely correspond to each other in all respects, in all their modes of being and operation (Son 2004, p. 443; Hong 2003, p. 97).[19] Metaphysical *li* and physical *ki* (*qi*) are, in other words, two distinct yet intertwined, mutually irreducible, and co-extensive aspects of the ultimate reality, i.e., what he calls “one transparently all-encompassing and overflowingly large thing-event [一箇虛圓盛大底物事 *ilgae heowon seongdae jeo mulsa*]” which is no other than the dynamic substance-in-process of all that is and becomes (Im 2001e, 19.1a/p. 383).[20] The two are different characterizations of the same ultimate reality, psychophysical energy being its characterization from the perspective of the world simply being the way it is, while pattern is the characterization of the ultimate reality from the perspective of the reason why the world is or must be the way it is (Im 2001d, 5.5b/p. 91).[21] The two characterizations together give expression to the ultimate reality’s visible and spontaneous movement of creative harmonization that constitutes the world on the one hand and its invisible function of rationally grounding and normatively governing the same world on the other. The ontological and cosmic creativity manifest in the universe, i.e., the ubiquitous phenomenon of the so-called “life-giving intention” (生意 *saeng-ui*/*sheng yi*) frequently extolled by the Neo-Confucians, is a joint manifestation of pattern and psychophysical energy.[22]

Nongmun’s thesis of the co-extensive and equal actuality of pattern and psychophysical energy implies that the ultimate reality is both the principle of unity and harmony on the one hand, and the principle of differentiation and delimitation on the other. In other words, he introduces difference and multiplicity directly into the heart of the “one transparently all-encompassing and overflowingly large thing-event” that is both pattern and psychophysical energy. His innovative rendition of the concept of “the original substance of psychophysical energy” (氣之本體 *ki ji bonche*) (Im 2001e, 19.24b/p. 394), which is all-pervasively present in the very process of its concrete delimitation into myriad individual configurations of psychophysical energy, underpins his key claim that “psychophysical energy is one, but its manifestations are many (氣一分殊 *gi-il bunsu*)” (Im 2001e, 19.4a/p. 384). By thus making psychophysical energy both the principle of unity *and* differentiation, he not only overturns the Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucian devaluation of psychophysical energy but also locates in it the source of the creativity and fecundity observed in the cosmos.[23]

In line with his ontologically symmetrical rendition of both the *li-ki* relation and the one-many relation, Nongmun veers away from the Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucian distinction between the Heaven-endowed original nature of things (本然之性 *benran zhi xing*), which is traditionally regarded as pattern in abstraction from psychophysical energy, and the so-called physical nature (氣質之性 *qizhi zhi xing*), i.e., the individually unique natures of concretely existing things determined and delimited by their specific psychophysical endowments. He rejects the distinction between the two on the ground that the individually unique natures retain their original impulse toward unity and harmony—the telltale sign of the efficacious presence of the original nature—in the form of their shared life-giving intention (Im 2001c, 3.5a/p. 44; cf. Choe 2009, pp. 354–56). In the case of humans whose individually unique natures are determined primarily by the respective psychophysical constitution of their heart-minds (心 *sim*), his disavowal of the distinction between the original nature and the physical nature leads him simply to label human nature the original nature (Im 2001d, 5.19a–b/p. 98). In fact, he insists on the original goodness of the concrete human heart-minds to such an extent that he draws up the following corollary to his main thesis: “The heart-mind and the nature are equally actual

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19 Nongmun’s thought amounts to a parallel and “dipolar” construction of the pattern-psychophysical energy relation.

20 For citations from Im Seong-ju’s *Nongmunjip*, I give the book number and the page number in the traditional format, and then (after a slash) the page number in the modern pagination, as its “modern” edition is in fact a facsimile of the traditional format.

21 Nongmun states, “Its being so refers to psychophysical energy, while its reason for being so corresponds to pattern [其然者氣也; 所以然者理也]”.

22 The notion of “life-giving intention” was championed by Cheng Hao and Zhu Xi. Nongmun himself acknowledges the influence of Cheng Hao and Zhu Xi on his notion of “life-giving intention” (Im 2001e, 19.10b–11a/pp. 387–88).

23 Nongmun regards the phenomenon of “life-giving intention” as a principal evidence for the creatively harmonizing power of psychophysical energy (Im 2001e, 19.3a/p. 384, 19.6b/p. 385, 19.28a/p. 396).

(心性同實 *simseong dongsil*)" (Im 2001a, 9.37a/p. 191; Im 2001b, 6.12b/p. 112).[24] The end-product of his renovation of Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucian metaphysics is a robust defense of the inherent moral subjectivity and agency of all human beings—the Mencian heritage—whose political implications are still much to be drawn out and explored.

4. Toward a Pluralistically Comprehensive Doctrine of Confucian Democracy

Nongmun was, of course, neither a pluralist nor an advocate of democracy. He remained within the orbit of ethically monistic and socially patriarchal Korean Cheng-Zhu Confucianism and did not develop the possible, ethically and politically liberating, implications of his thought. Nonetheless, if differences and multiplicity are at the heart of ultimate reality as he suggested, then this may provide us with an occasion to reconsider the moral and political significance of a Confucian metaphysics for a pluralistic democracy. In a Confucian metaphysics inspired by Nongmun, the plurality and differences that characterize our embodied existence could no longer be viewed as secondary and derivative qualities co-emergent with our individual birth from our supposedly singular, unitary origin and ground of being. This implies that, for such a pluralistically comprehensive Confucian doctrine, the existence within a pluralistic democracy of different values and groups of people, named along various markers of identity and difference (gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, etc.), would reflect the nature of reality as such. Pluralism, including political pluralism, would be an intrinsic feature of the landscape within its allegedly totalizing horizon. Furthermore, by giving the nod to the idea of popular sovereignty as capable of underpinning the constitution of a body politic made up precisely of diverse groups of people beholden to different value systems, such a Confucian metaphysics would reject the much-debated conception of popular sovereignty as unitary.[25]

For much of the history of the modern nation-states, popular sovereignty was understood and exercised on the model of absolute monarchy, by opposing the unity of the sovereign to the multiplicity of the multitude.[26] Hobbes, one of the early theorists of the modern sovereign state, famously described the hypothetical social contract through which human beings, desperate to overcome the state of nature fraught with a "war of every man against every man" (Hobbes 1958, p. 256), voluntarily surrendered their individual sovereignty, i.e., their natural right to govern and to defend themselves, to a single sovereign power—either a monarch or an assembly—in order to constitute a commonwealth that promised protection and security (335–40). Although the sovereign was, for Rousseau, the law-giving "general will" of the people forming one nation instead of the will of the monarch, its sovereignty was, nevertheless, indivisible (Rousseau 1993, pp. 200–2). Furthermore, for popular, democratic sovereignty to work, the multitude, who were no more than a rabble, must be molded into a people with a unitary will, which required the state with legitimate political authority to subject the chaotic bodies of the multitude.[27]

This unitary view of popular sovereignty finds one of its most sinister contemporary renditions in Carl Schmitt, who defines the essence of the political as consisting in a friend-enemy distinction, publically conceived, and the existential struggle of the people to survive against external and internal

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24 Nongmun's main theses, "Pattern and psychophysical energy are equally actual [理氣同實 *i gi dong sil*]" and "The heart-mind and the nature completely correspond [to each other] [心性一致 *sim seong il chi*] were originally coined by his teacher, Yi gan, to refer primarily to the human heart-mind in its un-activated state in which the original substance of psychophysical energy fully resonates with the original human nature's mandate of empathy and harmony. Nongmun applied this insight to what might be called ultimate reality, expanding the notion of *i gi dong sil* to cover the ground and depth of the entire cosmos (Choe 2009, p. 352).

25 In affirming the notion of popular sovereignty, the pluralistically comprehensive Confucian metaphysics which I am suggesting in this essay sides with Confucian democrats like Sor-hoon Tan and Sungmoon Kim over against the advocates of Confucian meritocracy, such as Joseph Chan and Jiang Qing.

26 For the following discussion of popular sovereignty, I am indebted to Clayton Crocket (Crocket 2011, pp. 45–49).

27 Rousseau describes how the "multitude" (p. 194) becomes united in one sovereign body politic though social contract, and claims that when the sovereign democratic state is dissolved, democracy, the rule of the citizens, degenerates into *ochlocracy*, the rule of the (chaotic) multitude (p. 259).

threats (Schmitt 2007, pp. 26–27). The political entity, i.e., the state, decides on the friend-enemy distinction, separating out the "public enemies" from the body politic internally and defending itself from other states externally (pp. 29–30). The state's sovereignty lies precisely in its power to create the friend-enemy grouping and, in so doing, to produce itself as a political community beyond mere societal or associational groupings (p. 39). The citizens of a democratic state, the *demos*, exercise popular sovereignty insofar as they purge themselves of hostile, alien elements within and stand united in opposition to enemies without.

A pluralistic Confucian metaphysics would not be able to accommodate the unitary conception of popular sovereignty, let alone Schimtt's extreme version of it. It would refuse to conceive the people's autonomous capacity to rule themselves as predicated on a production of "them"—i.e., the politically externalized remainder that Giorgio Agamben memorably calls *homo sacer* (Agamben 1998). In face of the political storm and the media war stirred up in South Korea recently by the arrival of Yemeni refugees in the southernmost island of Jeju, it would repudiate any notion of a homogeneous and unitary *demos* that can come into being only by erecting border walls, both visible and invisible, beyond which immigrants, refugees, and undesirable minorities are to be cast out. In response to the heated confrontations between LGBTQI-pride marchers and violent counter-demonstrators in the city of Incheon, it would support the notion of popular sovereignty as the freedom of self-governance enjoyed by a body of people bound together even across deep differences by critically affectionate solidarity, which Sungmoon Kim insightfully captures with his notion of Confucian public reason based on critical affection (*jeong*) and *uri*-responsibility. The *Confucian* character of such a pluralistic metaphysics lies precisely in this—that it underwrites the idea of a body politic, which is capable of peaceably holding together diverse groups of people beholden to different value systems, on the basis of the humane heart of empathy claimed to be in all of us, whose many names are *ren*, *jeong*, critical familial affection, critically affectionate solidarity, and so on. The *democratic* character of such a Confucian metaphysics comes to the fore when it rejects the elitism of traditional Confucian virtue politics, viz., when it declines to prioritize the objectively settled and unchanging universal pattern of benevolent sociopolitical organization, allegedly discovered by the ancient sages and entrusted to the care of the enlightened *junzi*, as the most unsullied articulation—patterning (*li*)—of the humane heart of empathy.

Precisely how, then, does such a pluralistically comprehensive Confucian doctrine appeal to the humane heart of empathy in order to provide support to the idea of a Confucian democratic polity? Here, the all-encompassing metaphysical horizon of the pluralistic Confucian doctrine serves to anchor, ontologically, the pivotal moral-political notion of critically affectionate solidarity. Its affirmation of the ontological ultimacy of both one and many, both unity and diversity, in a universe as lush and bountiful as ours would enable us to surmise, if not to know for certain, that the differences at the heart of reality are held together peaceably by something analogous to the humane heart of mutual empathy, so that myriad patterns (*li*) and harmonies—a cosmos—could be born. In other words, despite the chaotic percolation of *différance* that all-pervasively characterizes the ontological depth of our being (to borrow Derrida's celebrated term for the unending non-teleological processes of elemental mutual differentiation at the core of any seemingly stable essential unity), what prevents reality from collapsing into a state of perpetual conflict and barren chaos is no other than something like mutual affection that brings together the differences to ground—that is, to "pattern"—a meaningful and valuable cosmos. It is precisely in this sense that the two prominent examples of mutual empathy and affection, namely the cardinal Confucian virtue of *ren* and the Korean *jeong*, are manifestations in the human sphere of the cosmic and metacosmic "life-giving intention," i.e., the boundlessly generous creativity at the root of things. Notwithstanding the Daoist rejoinder, that "heaven and earth are not humane (天地不

仁 *tiandi buren*)"[28] the pluralistic Confucian metaphysics would insist on the affective—empathetic and therefore humane—constitution of the world's *suoyiran* (所以然), i.e., the reason for there being a world.

Such a Confucian doctrine of the affective grounding of a pluralistic cosmos would enable us to claim that the peaceable co-flourishing of different values and diverse groups of people in a world as vital and fecund as ours—all its discord and conflicts notwithstanding—reflects the deepest undercurrent of reality pulsing with mutual empathy and affection. The pluralistic Confucian metaphysics of the kind I have suggested would allow us to venture a thesis, that our freedom to live and thrive, each of us in our own distinct way, will not inevitably jeopardize the bonds of critical affection that sustains a pluralistic Confucian democracy, and that, even without the learned elites' paradigmatic ethico-political patterning (*li*) of our mutual empathy, we can in our freedom traverse our differences to forge patterns (*li*) of peaceable co-flourishing. Such a Confucian metaphysics would offer a "religious" basis for the trust we put in the strength and resilience of Confucian public culture to hold our fractious democratic commonwealth together. It would even be able to provide a metacosmic rationale for believing in the power of Confucian public culture to bridge our disparate and contentious ways with what Kwok Pui-lan and Joerg Rieger call "deep solidarity"—the solidarity of those who have compassion for one another on account of their shared suffering, i.e., their common experience of oppression, exploitation, and marginalization, even with all their differences in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, religion, and so on (Rieger and Kwok 2012, p. 28). Confucianism as a comprehensive doctrine, when so reimagined, could even be said to be indispensable for the well-being of a pluralistic democratic commonwealth in East Asia, given the power to tug at the body and mind, which the Confucian discourses still wield widely in East Asian nations, especially in South Korea, despite more than a century of intellectual marginalization and neglect.

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[28] Daodejing 5.1. Of course, the famous Daoist saying does not imply that heaven and earth—nature—are not fecund. It merely rejects any attempt to subsume that cosmic fecundity and creativity under what the Daodejing regards as human artifice responsible for the creation of human values, institutions and ways of life.

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